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IRAN

Current Situation

The fundamentalists are continuing to tighten their grip on the government and media. They have squeezed their opponents out of official positions, temporarily closed a leading liberal newspaper in Tehran, and issued new restrictions on political demonstrations, formation of political parties, and licensing of publications. []

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Bani-Sadr has temporarily strengthened his position by winning approval to name Khomeini's son-in-law as his representative on a three-man committee mandated by Khomeini to mediate the power struggle. Over the past few weeks he has been receiving increasingly open support from various politicians and groups opposed to clerical domination. []

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There has been a surge of violent clashes between supporters of leftist paramilitary groups and of the fundamentalists. Violence against the clergy also continues: a senior fundamentalist ayatollah narrowly escaped assassination in Shiraz in late March. In contrast, fighting between dissident Kurds and government forces in the northwest has declined appreciably.

Prospects for Political Change

A showdown between the fundamentalists and the so-called moderates is not likely as long as Khomeini lives. Khomeini prefers to balance political forces in the Islamic Republic--and preserve his own position--by identifying himself with popular criticism of fundamentalist excesses while supporting the idea of a fundamentalist-led government. []

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Iranian political stability is vulnerable to Khomeini's removal, particularly if he should die unexpectedly from a health crisis or assassination. An isolated violent act against Khomeini and/or other senior fundamentalists--and even against Bani-Sadr--could initiate reprisals that would throw Iran into chaos. []

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The Soviet Angle

The USSR continues to try to curry favor with the fundamentalists, to try to stiffen their anti-Western orientation, and to undercut the moderates, whom it believes want to move against the Iranian left. Moscow probably hopes that the small but well organized Tudeh Party will be able to prosper once Khomeini dies. Moscow has also continued efforts to expand

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economic relations. Iranians remain suspicious of Soviet intentions toward Iran and wary of leftist groups' efforts to expand their strength. []

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Status of the Exile Opposition

Former Prime Minister Bakhtiar and former martial law administrator Oveisi and other exile leaders have not been able to mount a credible challenge to the Khomeini regime on any front. Longstanding jealousies and conflicting ambitions have prevented cooperation in even the most general terms. []

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Iraq and other opponents of the Khomeini regime now provide only limited financial assistance to some exiles. Most are virtually broke, have no real organization, and little appeal in Iran. Bakhtiar and Oveisi haven't shown the ability and appeal to focus popular discontent on themselves as legitimate alternatives to the Khomeini regime. Admiral Madani, whose January 1980 presidential campaign showed he has some political following in Iran, has not been very active since his escape from Iran last summer. []

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Like the more prominent exiles based in West Europe, the younger, articulate exiles who have surfaced recently--mainly former senior officers who have been watching from the wings in the US--hope to gain backing from the new US administration. They believe, as do most Iranians, that the US is able to install someone in power in Tehran despite the lack of a coherent following or organization. []

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